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Older people's forums in the United Kingdom: civic engagement and activism reviewed

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Review

Older people’s forums in the United Kingdom: civic engagement and activism reviewed

Article classification: Literature review

Keywords: older people; elders; forums; activism; civic engagement; participation; empowerment; citizen engagement

Abstract

Purpose

This paper reviews the literature on UK older people’s forums. Forums seek to influence statutory responses to ageing, and enable older people to speak up on matters important to them. The review examined three facets of forums: their membership, structures and effectiveness.

Methods

Methods included searching databases, internet and specialist libraries for materials relating to older people’s forums. Key points were extracted and source material described but not subject to quality appraisal. Relevant non-UK studies are included to draw contrast and comparisons.

Findings

Several studies and reports have explored forum members’ socio-demographic profiles, motivations and triggers for joining and the two-way rewards of participation. However, membership remains a minority activity, with only a small percentage of members actively engaged and the review highlights gaps in the literature on widening participation.

Both statutory and voluntary sectors have supported forum development and sustainability. There is little data on formal structures but some exploration of the informal communications and behaviours that sustain them has been undertaken.

Forums are viewed as effective but resource intensive. The size and representativeness of the membership, strength of influence and deployment of members’ expertise are all identified as potential contributors to effectiveness.

Research limitations

Some material may not have been accessible and there is potential bias by greater inclusion of journal published materials than other possible sources. Material was not quality appraised, and research literature and self-reporting by forums are presented alongside each other.

Practical Implications

Practitioners should familiarise themselves with current older people’s organisations locally to ensure that consultations are broad and reach different groups. While

partnerships with voluntary sector health and care providers are encouraged some of these groups may not wish to represent all older people. Wider reach may provide multiple perspectives. Help in kind as well as financial resources may be welcomed by older people's groups, such as meeting spaces, assistance with administration, and briefings that are accessible. Offering to meet with older people's forums to discuss matters regularly may provide insight into experiences of services and changing needs earlier than professional feedback. Dismissing older people's forums as made up of the 'usual suspects' is likely to be unfair and unhelpful to building up positive relationships.

Value

The review provides a preliminary assessment of the size and scope of research and grey literature on UK older people's forums, synthesising points of similarity and difference and identifying clear gaps in the evidence.

Introduction

In 2010 it was estimated that there were over 600 older people's local forums in the United Kingdom (UK) (Age UK, 2010), involving more than 200,000 older people in policy processes. These forums seek to influence the planning and provision of responses to ageing locally, regionally and nationally. They share common characteristics:

Forums give a voice to older people on matters that are important to them... they are run by older people for older people. For example, they get involved in consultation, influencing and campaigning on local issues. The forums are generally independent organisations with a constitution and a bank account. (Age UK, 2012, p13).

This paper presents a review of the literature concerning older people's forums at a time of renewed interest in asset-based approaches to older people (Volonteurope and CSV, 2012; OPM, 2012) and increasing recognition of the implications of an ageing society for the UK voluntary sector (Commission on the Voluntary Sector and Ageing, 2015). Notwithstanding this, some forums report reduced funding and

difficulties finding volunteers for committee roles (Age UK, 2012, p18), and numbers of active forums appear to have considerably reduced since the 2010 survey (Age UK, 2015).

The aim of this scoping review was to identify and appraise the evidence about three facets of older people’s forums: their membership, their structures, and their effectiveness.

Background

Older people’s voluntary organisations have a long history. Thane (2000, p360) noted that, despite the introduction of old age pensions, poverty in old age remained acute in the 1930s, and may have accounted for the rapid growth of Pensioners’ Associations. The first was founded in Scotland in 1937, then in Blackburn in 1938, coming together in 1942 to form the National Federation of Old Age Pensioners’ Associations. Slightly earlier, the National Spinsters’ Pensions Association was founded in 1935 to advocate for the lowering of pension age for unmarried women, and was strongly supported by working class and lower middle class women and by some but not all trade unions (Thane, 2000, pp 284-5). As Barnes (2005) observed, some continuities remain in terms of the membership and campaigning focus of the National Pensioners Convention and the retired members’ sections of some trades unions. Historians (e.g. Pratt, 1993) have commented on similar developments internationally in Canada and the United States.

Other old age focused voluntary groups were rooted in concerns about the welfare of older people (eg the National Council for Old People’s Welfare, later Age Concern, now Age UK). These promoted the ‘relief’ of older people – much needed in the depression of the 1930s and brought to light in war time (Means and Smith, 1985). Many Age UK groups became vehicles for older people’s engagement in local and

national debates and activities (see Age UK, 2010) while others concentrated on providing independent services as part of the third sector.

It is in this context that this paper is set; the aim of the literature review was to draw on the research and 'grey' (information produced outside research or commercial publishing) literature on UK older people's forums to examine their membership, their structures, and what is known about their organisational effectiveness. The study was funded by the Trust for London that commissioned this study to identify particular gaps in the evidence that might inform forum development.

Methods

The methods for this scoping review included searching databases for research about older people's civic engagement and activity, using the search term 'older people's forums' and related terms such as 'activism', 'participation' and 'civic involvement'; internet searching to access reports, websites and other material; and consulting the Centre for Policy on Ageing's specialist library and the researchers' own libraries. The material collected was read and key points extracted but, as with many other scoping reviews, the research and other material accessed were not subject to an appraisal of their quality. Notwithstanding this, the findings of a scoping review may usefully provide a preliminary assessment of the size and scope of available research literature and other forms of evidence (Manthorpe and Moriarty, 2014). This method of reviewing the literature on a topic where there is a variety of material from different sources is increasing popular, although there is considerable variation in approaches and there is no consensus on the treatment of sources and the management of potential bias. In recognition of this, the present paper reports the basis of the materials that are cited.

This paper organises the findings of the review into three themes that were the foci of the review: **activism** (membership); **structural characteristics** (internal organisation), and **organisational effectiveness** (impact of forums' activities). The literature mainly relates to the UK but other relevant studies are included to draw contrast and comparisons. Accounts of individual older people who are politically engaged have generally focused on individuals with a '*lifetime of commitment*' (see Andrews, 1991); although not the focus of this paper there is some overlap with these.

Membership

This section presents an account of the evidence covering forum membership, including members' profiles, motivations, and degrees of involvement.

Profile of members

The membership of older people's forums consists of volunteers, and older volunteers have been extensively studied and profiled by researchers. Gould (2007) observed that a common approach is to analyse the characteristics of older people who volunteer in formal organisations. Some researchers have used the term '*volunteer identity*' when describing people whose volunteer activity is a prominent part of their lives - they '*become the job*'. Gould (2007) suggested that the civically engaged older volunteer was '*a minority of one in a hundred for the most active forms of engagement*' and likely to be:

- A prosocial personality – agreeable, helpful and socially active
- Motivated by gaining personal wellbeing in return for giving time and energy
- About the age of 65 and in good physical health
- Of above average level of education and possessing sufficient financial resources
- Holding religious beliefs and possessing altruistic, non-materialistic values.

1 A study of active older citizens in The Netherlands (Bekkers, 2005, p451) similarly
2 concluded '*Civic engagement increases with the level of education, religiosity,*
3 *interest in politics, and post-materialistic value orientation.*'
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8 From the United States (US), Alder et al. (2007) compared the demographic
9 characteristics of older people in three activist groups (n = 79) and a non-activist
10 group (n = 46). They found all groups similar in age, race, and religious affiliation but
11 activists had significantly more years of education (p = 0.001), higher incomes (p =
12 0.04), and were more likely female (p = 0.04) than non-activists.
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20 Barnes et al. (2012) interviewed 61 members of Sussex older people's forums,
21 finding that:
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24 ... most of our respondents still used a car, almost all were home owners, and
25 a great many came from professional employment backgrounds, it indicates
26 that the forum membership is mainly 'middle class'. (Barnes et al., 2012, p268)
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32 This finding may have particular salience, especially since Curry and Fisher (2012)
33 noted that trust tends to be higher amongst '*better off*' older people. They later
34 suggested that education and qualifications seemed to determine whether older
35 people became involved in local activities (Curry and Fisher, 2013). Worcester (1999)
36 had earlier suggested that '*grey power*' may more likely find expression in voting,
37 with allegiances to traditional class patterns, as well as in community activism (p. 28).
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46 Less is known about how this type of volunteering changes as people age further,
47 beyond early retirement. Crawley and Edwards' (2008) survey of forums in one
48 English region collected details of members' ages. While forums declared
49 themselves open to anyone over the age of 50 years, half the members were aged
50 between 65-75 (49%), a third were 75-85 (37%), while 12% were under 65 and only
51 5 per cent were over 85 years. Kloseck and colleagues have also suggested that:
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... current community capacity-building approaches may not work with very old individuals with multiple and complex health conditions. (2006, p87)

Unsurprisingly, in London there was higher representation of different Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) groups (Vegeris et al., 2007a) among forum members, within generic local forums, and within specialist minority groups.

Other research has explored the potential role of personality factors and the ways in which positive reinforcement may sustain activists' involvement and commitment. Lodi-Smith and Roberts (2007, p80) concluded that *'people who invest more in social institutions tend to be warmer, more responsible and organized, and less anxious and depressed than others.'* Finkelstein and colleagues (2005, p414) suggested that a person with a 'recognised' volunteer identity was likely to want to maintain this status.

Motivations and prompts

In their study of London older people's and other service user participation, Schehrer and Sexton (2010) identified a desire among activists to *'get things done and to put something back'*. From Australia, Petriwskyj et al. (2014) suggested that older people's participation involved both self- and other-directed motivations, and practical and abstract considerations, echoing Gould's (2007) suggestion that the civically engaged older volunteer was motivated by the two-way benefits of gaining personal wellbeing in return for giving time and energy to the community.

Research in Sheffield investigating why older women engaged in local forum activities found that they wanted to be heard by local policymakers and to collaborate with providers, but in addition:

They valued the intrinsic and not just the practical outcomes of the project: learning from and supporting one another; realising that they were not alone;

feeling valued, validated and important; and building confidence. (Warren 2005, p10)

In their study of older citizen engagement in London, Vegeris et al. (2007a) reported that one key life event that prompted involvement in forums was retirement, whilst other prompts were recent experiences of bereavement and caring. Interview participants stressed the importance of personal contact and encouragement, a 'buddy system', whereby veteran members befriended new forum members (ibid pp 37-38). Vegeris et al. (2007b) considered that forums were not generally attractive to those interested in single issues or community work, or uncomfortable in groups.

A study of older people's forums across one English region (Crawley and Edwards, 2008, p9) summarised their main activities and showed that whilst giving a 'voice' to older people was the most popular (84%), forums offered a range of other benefits, namely:

- Providing advice and information (82%) and signposting where to get help (70%)
- Information on Government policies (69%) and publishing a newsletter (68%)
- Offering social activities (16%)

More broadly, the literature indicates that all forums offer social activities for members, even if not explicitly stated in their aims (Malin, 2005; Davis, 2006; Vegeris et al., 2007a; 2007b; Evaluation Trust, 2008; Age UK, 2012). Vegeris et al (2007a, p34) found that these maintained members' interest and commitment.

Whilst considering the drivers for participation in older people's forum, the literature also touches upon factors more likely to inhibit participation. Barnes and colleagues (2012) observed that while older people's forums are an established part of the UK landscape of participatory governance, this reflected older people's membership of place-based communities, rather than their identities as consumers of health or

welfare services. Location seemed to be more influential in prompting engagement than experience of a specific disability or service (see Barnes and Bennett, 1998).

Although newly developed forums were envisaged by Lancashire County Council as having a social care focus, it soon became evident to their evaluators that they would need a broader outlook if they were to appeal to greater numbers of older people (Cornes et al., 2006). One practitioner commented: *"If you tell people [the forum] is about social services they think it's about taking children into care"*. Discussing *'what works'* when getting people involved, development workers stressed the importance of *'hot topics'* of local importance: transport, sheltered housing and hospital discharge were common themes discussed in the 12 district forums.

Degrees of involvement and the 'usual suspects'

Overall levels of older people's involvement in local forums are low. Reed et al. (2006) considered forums addressing policy and planning initiatives, one of their case studies being Growing Older in Darlington (GOLD) which Gould (2007) described as *'well-organised, thoughtfully planned and adequately resourced'*. Even so, only one in 50 of the retired local population were members, with only one in 500 classified as *'active'*. Gould (2007) observed that membership figures for older people's forums in Wales were similar.

Members of Cambridgeshire Older People's Forum (Runnicles, 2010) explored older people's involvement across the county, concluding that while greater engagement appeared to be emerging, *'direct involvement of older people in the planning, provision and monitoring of services appears a minority practice'* (p10). Another study suggested that older people who are activists saw themselves as personifying the values of inter-dependence, reciprocity and *'keeping-going'*, but could be

1 sometimes censorious about non-activist older people whom they regarded as '*giving*
2 *up*' or '*taking without putting back*' (Townsend et al., 2006).
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6 Gould (2007) considered the expression '*the usual suspects*', used to describe the
7 most active forum members. He suggested that these were '*go-to*' people who were
8 known for their willingness to participate. Blakey and colleagues (2006) confirmed the
9 existence of '*usual suspects*' but the organisation 50+ Engagement in Wales
10 reflected:
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18 Often in community consultations the same faces are seen. Sometimes, these
19 regular attendees are called '*usual suspects*'. The term is disrespectful. These
20 people are prepared to volunteer their time and energy and should be valued
21 for doing so. On the other hand, the '*usual suspects*' sometimes pursue their
22 own agendas regardless of the views of others they are meant to be
23 representing. (50+ Citizen Engagement Project Wales, no date)
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32 Members of older people's forums seemed sensitive to views that only the '*usual*
33 *suspects*' are involved (Barnes et al., 2012) and considered the term pejorative.
34 Nonetheless, forums commonly consist of people who are '*multi-volunteers*' (Gould
35 2007). Bond and Fuertes (2012) observed that most members of Edinburgh's
36 strategic ageing group were involved in at least one other local group, as well as
37 national forums or organisations. Barnes (2005) found that most committee members
38 had histories of active involvement in collective activities, such as unions. Likewise,
39 Davies and River described some members of older people's groups as having
40 familiarity with and expertise in the functioning of services (2006, p50) and the
41 Evaluation Trust (2008) observed that most forums contain:
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55 ... a core of older people who, on a voluntary basis, undertake the
56 organisation of the forum, sit on scrutiny panels and act as representatives on
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other forums, utilizing their experience and knowledge to effect change and influence. (p17)

Structural characteristics

This section outlines what the literature reveals about the forms older people’s forums have taken and how they have been sustained from without and within.

Geographical scope

Most older people’s forums are locally based and are simply named *Older people’s forum* – making reference to their locality. Others take the title of a *50+ Forum* or variations on this, for example one county listed 10 groups, consisting of Older People’s Forums, a Senior People’s Forum, Senior Citizens Action Networks and a Counsel of Older Residents (Warwickshire County Council, 2013).

A minority of forums described themselves as overarching or ‘umbrella’ organisations co-ordinating a membership of voluntary groups and organisations of and for older people (for example see Leeds Older People’s Forum, 2014). At regional level in England, overarching (regionally focussed) older people’s groups and forums were declared important members of the UK Advisory Forum on Ageing (UK Advisory Forum on Ageing, 2011). The Greater London Forum for Older People (GLFOP), established 1988, is one such umbrella organisation for older people’s forums. It undertakes capacity building roles for member forums, such as:

- Support on best governance, marketing, recruitment, fundraising and influence
- Providing information, a magazine, events, conferences and training workshops
- Representation to regional and national organisations
- Campaigns on regional issues
- A Minority Ethnic Elders Group (GLFOP, no date)

A description of older people's forum infrastructure needs to mention the UK-wide Better Government for Older People (BGOP) programme (1998-2009). BGOP included 350 local member organisations, sharing good practice with the aim of promoting older people's participation to influence national and local policy and service provision. Partly subscriber funded and partly in receipt of central government funding, BGOP funded a UK Older People's Advisory Group (OPAG), as a '*direct voice*' for older people. BGOP was described as having been '*instrumental in spreading best practice*' (Elbourne, 2008), however Elbourne's government commissioned review proposed the closure of BGOP and the setting up of the UK Advisory Forum on Ageing (which itself closed in 2015).

Formation and sustainability

Although 'independence' is often referred to as a defining feature of older people's forums, the statutory sector (mostly local government but also some central and regional government) and voluntary sector have assisted their development and sustained their work. Barnes et al. (2003) charted the development of one forum, noting that initial discussions were held between older people active in the Pensioners' Convention, Age Concern, trades unions, council officers and councillors (p385). Both financial assistance and development support, for example via the Help the Aged's 'Speaking-up for Our Age' Programme, have been catalysts for forum formation and expansion (Burns and Cooper, 1999). Development of forums has also been directly fostered by local authorities (see Cornes et al.'s (2006) description of 12 older people's forums funded to be coterminous with Lancashire County Council's district boundaries). A forum's independence or dependence may be fluid over time, but broadly classifications, such as that by Outside the Box (2015), observe distinct types: those 'independent' and accountable only to older people; those that are council (or other statutory organisation) hosted, but that still strive to operate

independently; and those set up by a council (or other statutory organisation) in a consultative capacity, which may be seen more as a ‘reference group’. Statutory funded forums may have to strive to maintain their independence and the scope of their activities (Evaluation Trust, 2008; Crawley and Edwards 2010).

Seeking to promote older people’s forums, the charity Help the Aged (now Age UK) funded a national programme of conferences and grants. In its first year (1998-99) 53 grants were awarded (range £500 - £1,000). According to the programme evaluators, grants were particularly valued because activists were accustomed to operating on ‘a shoe-string’ (Cornes et al., 2006, p2). Difficulties in establishing new forums were: perceived apathy among older people, enticing people to join before the forum had a ‘success’ story, and getting people to take on positions of responsibility, such as chair, secretary and treasurer. Financial support seemed most effective where a development worker was also provided.

Cornes et al. (2006) reported that forum members and their development workers had only vague plans about their future sustainability, and only three of the 12 forums studied had secured additional resources (2005-06). Vegeris et al. (2007a) also found, in their study of older citizen engagement in London, that lack of financial resources presented problems for some forums, especially core funding to cover administrative expenses. Time spent securing financial support was seen as diverting attention from core group functions (Vegeris et al., 2007a), so forums completely independent of statutory or voluntary support experienced sustainability problems. Some forums have sought out local private sector sponsors for core activities or individual events or publications (for example, see Senior London, 2013; Leeds Older People’s Forum, 2014).

Governance and internal communication

The governance of older people's forums is not always easy to assess and was little explored in the research literature. The literature produced by forums themselves uses formal terms such as 'constitutions', 'terms of reference' and Annual General Meetings (for example, see Norwich Older People's Forum, 2012) and indicates that most local forums are not registered charities, although larger regional umbrella forums seem more likely to be (for example, see GLFOP, no date). Some forums in Crawley and Edwards' (2008) regional study believed that they could not be classed as charitable if they undertook campaigning, however, others included charitable purposes, such as supporting older people in need, which assisted access to charitable funding. Most of the forums in their study had a management committee, usually comprising the most active members, whose roles ranged from administration to liaising with local councillors and statutory authorities, and some forums had additional subgroups addressing particular issues, such as 'housing' and 'social care'.

Barnes (2005) explored relationships and communications between forum members in her case study of two forums. She saw people abiding under the group rules of a formal constitution and mode of conducting business in forum meetings and publications, but this formality went alongside informal conversations, expressions of friendliness and social behaviour, such as having tea (classed as forms of social 'greeting'). She observed that forums set formal boundaries, and while stressing the importance of mutual respect, members also tolerated disagreements and apparent 'lax' behaviour in meetings. Barnes concluded that that a '*combination of humour and a clear agenda and constitution for the group enabled disagreements to be accommodated*' (Barnes, 2005, p255). Curry and Fisher (2012) considered that 'system trust' among older people in engagement activities was built around helpfulness, honesty, reasonableness and civility.

Organisational effectiveness

This section outlines the features and activities of forums associated by both members and observers as contributing to effectiveness.

A central finding from the review of a regional programme of forum development by Cornes et al. (2006, p6) was that older people’s forums were neither quick nor easy means of public engagement. Importantly, they observed, in order to be effective, time is needed to build a robust membership base and to gain credibility with both older people and the policy makers and service providers with whom they wish to work. Cornes et al. (2006) reported that the long-term aspirations for new forums most frequently centred on increasing the size and representativeness of membership. In aiming to promote accessibility, forums employed strategies such as rotating the location of meetings (Cornes et al., 2006). Members of new forums feared that forums might be just ‘*talking shops*’ with little influence, however, more established forums were more confident about their potential to ‘*make a difference*’ and had lists of their achievements to date, ranging from getting a bus-stop reinstated to influencing how stroke patients were treated. Established forums were linked to a range of council and health strategic planning groups, as avenues for influence, however, this ‘*landscape*’ and the constant organisational change in local statutory agencies were ‘*off-putting*’ to older people who lacked experience or knowledge of these subjects.

Other literature highlighted the skills and competencies that forums and their observers identified as being crucial for organisational effectiveness. Forum members interviewed by Taylor (2006) identified a need to increase their effectiveness as training, and support and information to guide their own research.

Vegeris and colleagues (2007a, p15) reported that council officers within London Boroughs judged older people's forums to be their most effective as well as the most frequent means of engaging with older people. However, the strength of forums studied varied geographically and over time. While the involvement of older people in shaping London services was judged to be in its infancy by Schehrer and Sexton (2010), in contrast, Wistow and colleagues (2011, p61) commented positively on the patterns of mutual respect and engagement that some forums had adopted with local statutory agencies' managers (referred to as 'commissioners'):

Managing power relationships calls, therefore, for sophisticated understandings on the part of both users and commissioners if they are to make the most of whatever space they occupy separately and together. In a sense, it is the essence of successful user involvement and one where appropriate skills and competencies really are relevant.

Crawley and Edwards (2008) described the different forums in one region as having their own ways of influencing but thought a common feature was their effective use of members' skills, contacts and expertise when negotiating and campaigning. Good working relationships with leading local councillors and local MPs were crucial. Professional backgrounds put to effective use included nursing, union experience, and a retired councillor who '*understands the way that the council operates, whom to contact and where decisions are being made*' (ibid, p15). Almost all (91%) of forum members surveyed in the region felt their views were heard and that they '*have an influence*' (ibid, p24).

While much of the literature has depicted older people's organisations as being successful and positive, a small number of commentators have criticised them for limited political vision '*...settling instead for more modest efforts on the part of well-intentioned citizens intent on giving back to society on a localized and volunteer*

basis' (Hudson, 2006, p17). Similarly, Holstein suggested that a *'political view of civic engagement is far more difficult than encouraging people to volunteer - it is apt to be messy, contentious, and exhausting'* (2006, p25).

Such a perspective throws light on the different interests and priorities of forums. In her doctoral study of older people's civic engagement in one London Borough (2011), Tobari reported that the older people's forum saw itself as part of a nationwide network of pensioners' groups, with valued links to the National Pensioners Convention. However, she described this as being at the expense of relationships with other local organisations, including the statutory bodies the forum might seek to influence.

Elsewhere Wistow and colleagues (2011) also highlighted the interrelationships of political interests and provided examples from Salford and Dorset of the mutual dependence of older people, council officers and local councillors. They described the skills and sensitivities required by effective forums, suggesting that these could arise from different life experiences, and concluded:

Local and national politics are critical parts of the context for local involvement ...While involvement by older people in commissioning cannot have an overtly party political association, it does need to understand and engage with political processes if it is to maximise its impact. Sensitivity and caution must be the order of the day, however, in a terrain littered with eggshells and 'heffalump traps' for the unwary or unworldly. (Wistow et al., 2011)

Discussion and conclusion

This review has drawn on a wide range of material in which the grey literature was prominent among the sources accessed. There are limitations to the review in that further material may not have been accessible online or via database and library

1 searches. There is a potential bias by inclusion of material that has been published in
2 journals where the quality of methods was more evident and the objectives of the
3 research and findings clearly expressed. However, this overview has added to the
4 case study materials assembled by different researchers and older people's forums
5 themselves by synthesising points of similarity and difference.
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13 There are questions for researchers arising from this review that might be considered
14 by older people's forums themselves. Forums thrive in receptive environments but
15 their role in creating or sustaining such environments is unclear (Wistow et al., 2011).
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20 The review has identified substantial interdependence between the older people's
21 traditional welfare sector and local activism, with shared memberships suggesting
22 complementarity rather than antagonism. Barnes et al. (2012) suggested that there
23 are choices for forums, such as stressing the geographic localism of its interests or
24 specific health or social care topics. How these imperatives are resolved would be
25 interesting to explore. The potential for building links between older people's and
26 disabled people's groups remains (Priestley and Rabiee 2002).
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36 As Barnes et al. (2003) observed, the '*question of 'who takes part' within such forums*
37 *is...critical to an understanding of how far new types of forums can contribute*' to
38 addressing forum objectives. It is therefore not surprising that a substantial part of the
39 available literature addressed forum membership. The evidence of membership
40 being dominated by the '*middle class*' highlights the gap in the literature on widening
41 participation in activist organisations, for example, by rotating meeting venues,
42 offering practical support, as well as peer support to introduce newcomers unused to
43 formats such as meetings, as suggested by Vegeris et al. (2007a). Succession
44 planning and membership decline are further topics where there is little data and the
45 present review was commissioned to assist forums' thinking in these areas with the
46 assistance of Age UK London and Greater London Forum for Older People.
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Gould (2007) noted that the stereotypical picture of the engaged older citizen may need adaptation in local contexts; however, this review found that researchers have accumulated substantial data about members and the rewards of participation, with more partial data on structures and internal communications and behaviours. Size and representativeness of membership, avenues of influence and deployment of members' expertise were all identified in the literature under review as contributors to forum effectiveness. Unusually there are some studies of 'what did not work' as well as 'what works'. Indeed, there may be a need for greater emphasis on capturing processes as well as outcomes, as one study of a (failed) initiative to start an older people's forum observed:

'Civic engagement was not a goal which could be measured and evaluated by means of definite criteria so that one could tick a check box when it was achieved. Rather, civic engagement was a process in which more and better civic engagement practices are sought' (Tobari, 2011, p231).

The studies in this review provided a wealth of detail about the older people who are civically engaged in the UK. This presents a different view of ageing at a time when it is often being problematised in policy, and suggests a different form of 'social capital' (Gray, 2009) beyond that of informal networks and the organised voluntary sector (National Coalition on Voluntary Action 2015). Critical gerontology (Martinson and Minkler, 2006) also suggests that researchers need to consider what forms of civic engagement are excluded from current activism.

This scoping review has identified the interface at local levels of older people's forums with the policymakers and service providers they aim to influence. The review contributes to an evidence base that can help ensure that older people's forums are set within individual dimensions, local communities, and wider society.

Implications for practice

On the basis of our research we would recommend that practitioners should familiarise themselves with older people's organisations locally to ensure that consultations are broad and reach different groups.

While partnerships with voluntary sector health and care providers are encouraged by central government some of these groups may not wish to represent all older people. Wider reach to other bodies who do not wish to be service providers may provide valuable multiple perspectives.

Help in kind as well as financial resources may be welcomed by older people's groups, such as meeting spaces, assistance with administration, and briefings that are accessible.

Offering to meet with older people's forums to discuss matters regularly may provide insight into experiences of services and changing needs earlier than professional feedback about quality and accessibility.

Dismissing older people's forums as made up of the 'usual suspects' is likely to be unfair and unhelpful to building up positive relationships. Many belong to multiple networks both local and national.

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